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Black Student Achievement and the Oppositional Culture Model

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This study explores the connection between Black student achievement and the oppositional culture model. The author examined the educational experience of both under-achieving and high-achieving high school students of African heritage in one urban high school in Massachusetts. Utilizing data from an exploratory study, the author suggests that Ogbu's oppositional culture explanation may not be applicable to the experience of certain Black heritage students in the United States.

It was the purpose of this study to explore the differences in self-concept, academic behavior, and self-reported personal experiences between high-achieving African heritage students and under-achieving African heritage students. This exploratory study was conducted in order to better understand the factors that contribute to the success or underachievement of African heritage students who are judged by their teachers to be academically capable of success; thus, it does not include students who are failing, drop-outs, or students judged by teachers as unable to cope with academic work. It is the purpose of this article to explore the significant findings of this study that appear to challenge the oppositional culture model of Black student achievement. There have been several studies with a focus on Black student achievement and underachievement. Cross, Strauss, and Fhagen-Smith (1999) discuss the implications of Black identity in terms of educational outcomes. Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, and Smith (1998), as well as Sellers and Shelton (2003), examine racial identity, perceived discrimination, and other influences on academic achievement. Ford (1996) examines strategies for reversing underachievement among gifted students. Teacher expectations and differential treatment have been shown to impact Black students' academic achievement (Ferguson, 2000; Roscigno, 1998). Both the pressures associated with test-taking and the structure of standardized tests are linked to the academic underachievement of African American students (Jencks, 1998; Steele, 1999). Steele (1992) and Ogbu (1991) show that the situational experiences that African American students face on a daily basis combined with their ethnic history in the United States has lead to disassociation and academic underachievement, which Steele calls "stereotype threat."

While many authors have examined this phenomenon, John Ogbu (1986, 1991) is possibly the most widely referenced author in regard to oppositional culture and Black student achievement. Ogbu suggests that years of oppression faced by Black families in the United States has caused Black students to form an oppositional culture model in which they no longer see the value of education and see success in education as a White value or trait. The findings from this study contradict this hypothesis. While this study is an exploratory one based on a small sample, it is clear that these students view their academic situation as a case of rejection and not opposition. They see their choices as a direct result of opportunities and personal interest rather than failure and underachievement.

METHOD

The setting is a diverse, urban high school in Massachusetts. This school has a population of 1,583 students, grades 7 through 12 (grades 7 and 8 are satellite students and only make up 85 students total). During the 2000-2001 academic year, 10.4% of students were classified as African American, 8.8% Asian, 16.9% Hispanic, .1% Native American, and 63.8% White. The high

school has a 90% daily attendance rate, and 85% of graduating seniors attend 2- or 4-year colleges. The school is centrally located between one of the poorer areas of the city and one of the more affluent areas of the city. This urban location has created a racially and economically diverse school population that remains approximately 64% White and 46% minority.

Initially, teachers were asked to identify African American students whom they considered to be high achievers or underachievers. What emerged from their lists were Black students with diverse ethnic backgrounds, many of whom were Afro-Caribbean or African but not African American. Although all of the students were Black, recent African immigrants as well as African Americans were nominated for this study. This was problematic because the teachers' use of the term "African American" combined many different ethnic groups with differing histories in the U.S. For that reason, the author renamed the overall group as "African heritage" in order to make accurate distinctions in the data of this study. Teachers were asked to identify specific characteristics of high-achieving and under-achieving students. Once the list of identifiable characteristics was established, teachers selected students based on the following criteria (students selected for the study had three or more of the criteria):

High-achieving Black students:

- The student shows effort in class.
- The student is prepared for tests, presentations, and daily discussion.
- The student achieves high grades.
- The student takes responsibility for work that needs to be done, whether it is during school or coming after school for assistance.
- The student shows a desire to learn. The student has plans for the future.

Under-achieving Black students:

- The student shows a lack of effort and sets low goals.
- The student has a lack of concern or interest in performing well academically.
- The student is irresponsible and lazy.
- The student has low self-worth.
- The student has a difficult living and/or social environment.
- The student has no parental support.
- The student has no traditional or academically related plans for the future.

The overall questions that guided this research are as follows: (a) What experiences have under-achieving and high-achieving Black students had that they feel were obstacles or barriers to succeeding in school? (b) What experiences have these students had that helped them to succeed in school? and (c) How are the experiences and reflection of the high-achieving and under-achieving students similar or different?

This study comes out of a phenomenological tradition, utilizing a multi-method design or triangulation. Focus groups are the primary data source, supplemented by quantitative data drawn from demographic questionnaires and a quantitative self-concept assessment. The focus group method encourages students to discuss their experiences and opinions in an open, supportive environment (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The author contacted the 26 students in grades 9-12 identified by teachers who requested their participation in this study. All of the students were of African heritage, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. The students were asked to participate in one of two separate focus groups; one consisting of *high-achieving students*, and the other consisting of *under-achieving students*. Due to the rigid schedules of the high achievers, two separate focus groups were conducted for this group. The first group consisted of three students, resulting in more speaking opportunities for each student. This small group setting also enabled students to go into more detail about their personal problems. The second high-achiever focus group had six students. Having two focus groups of high-achieving students of differing sizes resulted in an asymmetry of data.

The under-achieving focus group consisted of five students from the thirteen underachievers originally identified by teachers. Two of eight students who did not participate had dropped out of school, two others had after-school jobs, and the remaining four opted not to participate in the study. Therefore, the data collected from the underachievers come from one focus group, a cohort that was half the size of the high-achieving students. The focus groups consisted of nine female and five male students. The focus groups were conducted over a four-month period with each session lasting approximately sixty to ninety minutes. The groups were conducted by the researcher and were audio recorded.

In this study, two forms of quantitative data were collected from the students—the demographic questionnaire and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS, Piers & Harris, 1999). Before the PHCSC was administered or the focus groups were conducted, the students were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire contained questions regarding ethnicity, age, gender, parental education, family socioeconomic status, and extracurricular activities. This was designed to acquire the students' background information. Such data were used later to determine if there were any commonalities or differences in demographic data between the high-achieving and under-achieving groups.

The PHCSCS had been selected as the quantitative instrument to supplement the focus group data (Piers & Harris, 1999). The scale was developed in the 1960s and contains 80 items covering six subscales: Physical Appearance and Attributes; Anxiety; Intellectual and School Status; Behavior; Happiness and Satisfaction; and Popularity. Several authors have reviewed the PHCSCS (Byrne, 1996; Hattie, 1992; Wylie, 1989). Both Hattie (1992) and Wylie (1989) report the PHCSCS as the instrument used in more than 300 studies. Byrne (1996) cites the PHCSCS as being the most widely used self-concept assessment scale for children.

RESULTS

All of the students in this study faced challenges in their quest toward their own definition of academic success. However, the challenges for the high achievers differed from those of the underachievers.

High Achievers

The high achievers in this study cite many barriers that they must overcome on a daily basis to achieve academically. The challenges include: busy schedules; lack of time; family obligations; household chores; and parental problems. These students have developed time management skills to deal with many of these issues. What has proven to be more difficult for these students to deal with are the stereotypes that they are faced with on a daily basis within the school. They speak of stereotypes that come from teachers, White students, and Black students. The students do not differentiate between positive and negative stereotypes. They feel any stereotype that assumes they are to perform one way or another ultimately adds to the pressure of being a high-achieving Black student.

Many of the students in this study have come to accept that teachers view Black students as "troublemakers"; some have internalized this stereotype and agreed that many Black students are troublemakers. However, one student, Adrien (a pseudonym), a recent immigrant reacts to this stereotype with anger toward his fellow students and the teachers:

> It's not fair to me. . .most of us [Blacks] are really troublemakers. . .just go to class. . .it makes the rest of us who are trying really hard look bad. This teacher I had last year, the fact is he is not White and he doesn't treat White kids badly. So why do the White teachers do that?

The anger Adrien feels resonated among other students within the high-achieving group. They feel that everyday is a struggle to prove the teachers wrong, to prove they are capable and worthy of academic success. Given this struggle, what motivates these students to achieve?

Confidence is a key contributor to their academic success. All but two of the high achievers in this study have above average to high levels of academic and intellectual self-concept according to the PHCSCS and their self-reports. The two high achievers in crisis, Brooke and Aisha, have severe family difficulties. Brooke fell to the bottom one percent in overall happiness. She was identified as a high achiever in crisis. After a violent attack in her family in which the deceased, the perpetrator, and the witness were all members of her immediate family, Brooke's high grades plummeted. Her academic self-concept is most likely the result of her earlier years of academic success. Similarly, Aisha is struggling with a difficult parental relationship. All of the students except for Aisha and Brooke rank average to very much above average in academic self-concept from the 47th to the 98th percentile. That being said, these students also rank high in anxiety from the 30th to the 97th percentile. In fact, six out of the nine students' percentile rank of anxiety is statistically equal to or above that of their overall happiness and satisfaction. While levels of stress and anxiety are high, these students identify themselves as "scholars" and see themselves as fighters. Their academic success appears to be a direct result of the following factors: high self-concepts, time management skills, parental support and high expectations, the desire to prove stereotypes wrong, their own high expectations, and the desire to be responsible for their own lives and control their own destiny. This is a diverse group of high achievers with a mix of athletes and artists as well as the happy and the troubled.

Underachievers

The five underachievers are also a diverse group. Curtis is in honors, Jen was recently demoted from honors to level one (a step below honors, also referred to as college preparatory), and the other three students are all in level one. The four students with self-acknowledged popularity and parental support appear to be happy and content with their academic standing and lives in general.

Some similarities between the high achievers and underachievers are apparent. Jen, an under-achieving student, lacks family support, has some difficulty with her peers at school, and ranks in the bottom 10% on all the subscales of the self-concept assessment. The four other students all rank average to well above average on all the subscales of the PHCSCS. Anxiety also appears to be high in the underachievers, yet they self report less stress and unhappiness than the high achievers.

When asked how they feel about themselves as students, they readily admit to being smart yet lazy. They are fully aware that with effort they would achieve greater academic success. They also point to stereotypes held by White teachers and the treatment by these teachers as a hindrance to academic success. The underachievers in this study often feel as if they are "just one of twenty." They receive little to no individual support or encouragement. In addition, the underachievers believe that the majority of teachers within the school have prejudged them before getting to know them as students. This lack of support and connection to the school in combination with acceptance at home of mediocre grades seems to contribute to underperformance.

While these underachievers are struggling in school, they all agree that they respect the high achievers and say "it is cool" to be Black and smart. When asked why they do not join in the high achievers academic pursuits, they point to other interests. Juan stated that his goal is to be a rapper. He spends endless hours a day writing and practicing, instead of doing homework. Curtis, very articulately rattles off several self-made millionaires who were not college educated. These students see financial and emotional opportunities outside of the traditional educational system.

Before proceeding it is important to note the following differences between the high-achieving and under-achieving sample in this study. The majority of the high-achieving students speak foreign languages outside of school. In fact, 75% of the high achievers are bilingual. Students identified the following languages as spoken outside of school: Twi, Swahili, French, Akan, and Ghanaian. Based on the demographic data, the high achievers were all immigrants or first-generation U.S. citizens. All of the underachievers in this study are U.S. born, their families having been in the United States for multiple generations, and all are monolingual with English

being the only language spoken. Parental educational attainment appeared to have no significant impact on student achievement or academic motivation for either focus group.

There is a distinct difference in ethnic backgrounds between the high-achieving and under-achieving students in this study. Although ethnic diversity within the sample was not intentionally sought as a factor in this study, it emerged as a primary factor. Clearly, the teachers in this study identified African heritage voluntary immigrants for the high achieving sample and African American students for the under-achieving sample.

IMPLICATIONS OF BLACK ETHNICITY AND OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE

The division of ethnic groups within the Black student sample in this study was a significant cause for concern. The entire under-achieving group is African American, while the high-achieving group consists almost entirely of African heritage students who are recent immigrants or first-generation, U.S. born citizens. This finding might appear to confirm Ogbu's (1986, 1991) theory of voluntary and involuntary minority groups and oppositional culture. While there is indeed an ethnic split between the African American and other African heritage students in this study, this author would argue that the underachievers in this study did not credit White culture or any variation of that culture as having any impact on their achievement. According to the students themselves, their lack of academic success is not seen by them as a way to be anti-White or pro-Black by any means. Although students and their parents have experienced institutionalized racism, this author puts forth the idea that these students have not responded by developing an oppositional culture, but rather have faced rejection by taking other opportunities to work toward success.

Although possibly the most widely referenced author on Black student achievement, Ogbu's oppositional culture model is not applicable to the Black student sample in this study. Ogbu and Fordham's (1986) article on the burden of acting White focuses on the pressures Black students may feel in regard to choosing between academic failure and success. Based on the historical status of African American people in the United States, African American students may experience a disconnect from investment in academics. Ogbu acknowledges that one cannot generalize to an entire population, and there is variation in terms of coping mechanisms within the African American population. The experience of African Americans in the United States differs from other ethnic groups for several reasons. The involuntary entrance into the U.S. through the system of slavery produced a system of racial stratification. Racial stratification in this society has led to increased levels of poverty, unemployment, and substandard education within the African American community. African American individuals often do not see the value in education because of the "job ceiling." Ogbu, much like Roscigno (1998), offers the suggestion that Black people are at a disadvantage in this society and do not have the same economic opportunities as White Americans. As a result, some Black individuals may not see the value of education as a means to obtaining financial stability or social mobility.

According to Ogbu, African American students view education as a tool that is useful for White people in U.S. society, leading Black students to attribute doing well in school to White students only. In order to keep their own identity and not be accused of "acting White," they choose to not perform as well as they could in school (Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). Ogbu and Fordham suggest that African American students are concerned with being accused of "acting White" and this concern impacts academic achievement. Black students may limit themselves academically in order to fit in with their peers. Yet, the underachieving students in this study view education as a means to success for Black students as well as White students. When asked how they felt about the high-achieving students, underachievers claimed to respect their determination and commitment to academics. They cite individual personality differences rather than a racial or ethnic divide as the cause of the achievement disparity between the groups. They also cite the structure of the classroom and teaching style as impediments to their learning. The overpopulated classrooms are a distraction for many of the underachievers. State-mandated tests and associated

pressure of teachers to cover all necessary test-related material has resulted in confusion and less time for student questions in class. These are only some of the factors this sample identified as impacting their achievement.

Ogbu (1991) suggests that minority groups adapt differently to U.S. society based on how a particular minority group entered into the United States. He presents the idea of *voluntary minorities*, who come to this country voluntarily seeking to fulfill the "American Dream," and *involuntary minorities* who were forced to become members of American society through slavery or colonization. Ogbu believes that involuntary minorities such as African Americans suffer from what he calls "low effort syndrome" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 437).

Ogbu suggests that African American students do not have the academic success of other minority groups or White students due in part to their socio-historical experience in the U.S. During slavery, individuals of African descent were involuntary minorities who were placed into a subordinate "caste" system in society. A ceiling was put in place that denied African Americans access to upward social mobility; therefore, many developed a belief system and coping mechanisms that discounted formal education as a tool for social mobility (Ogbu, 1991). For decades many non-immigrant (involuntary) African American adults have been denied jobs and placed into subordinate positions where they developed coping mechanisms in order to make sense of the situation (Ogbu, 1991).

Ogbu suggests that an oppositional identity and culture has developed based on the history of most Blacks in the United States. Ogbu clarifies the concept of oppositional identity by using the term *cultural inversion* (Ogbu, 1991). Cultural inversion refers to the process whereby symbols, whether it be dress or language, and behaviors that are associated with a dominant culture are deemed inappropriate for a subordinate culture. Cultural inversion eventually leads to an "alternative cultural frame of reference," meaning some African Americans have a different set of values than Whites (p. 441). Furthermore, this set of values held by African Americans is in direct opposition to White culture since African American culture is oppositional in form and function. Many African American students may attribute academics, doing well in school, and the use of Standard English as "acting White." Historically, African Americans have been unable to succeed as a whole in White culture. In order to cope, African American students have their own ideal in which they emulate and promote. Students that do succeed in school are often forced to have a double consciousness or hide their success in order to avoid being accused of "acting White" (Ogbu, 1991).

Ogbu claims the Black experience in the United States has contributed to the failure of many African American students. Based on the historical experiences of African American parents in U.S. society, parents often pass on to their children their own beliefs that society will not reward Black student educational accomplishments as much as it does for White students. According to Ogbu, many African American students do not see any point in working hard or maintaining their efforts long enough to achieve academically.

While this author agrees with Ogbu's assessment of voluntary and involuntary immigrant populations, it would be argued that most Black students do not focus on White individuals, nor do they gauge their academic successes or failures on "Whiteness." These students do not make a conscious choice of academic failure or academic success. Rather, some Black students are motivated in areas other than academics that they view as rewarding. By this, the author suggests that some Black students opt for activities and pursuits that they have seen as beneficial to those like themselves or those they emulate, such as entertainers and athletes. This does not appear to be due to the development of an oppositional identity, a lack of motivation, or low effort; rather, it seems to be the result of rejection by the dominant culture and stereotyped images of successful Blacks in the media and popular culture. Many Black students are ambitious and may only exhibit Ogbu's "low effort syndrome" as it relates to academics.

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) also level strong criticisms at Ogbu's oppositional culture explanation. They use data from the first follow-up of the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study (NCES, 1995), primarily focusing on African Americans, Asians, and White

students, to argue that many African American students are actually more optimistic about future employment than White students. Moreover, they perceive education as key to getting these jobs at a higher percent than White students.

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) further critique Ogbu's second hypothesis that African Americans are more resistant to school, that is, based on how they were treated historically. Teacher reports document Black students as being in trouble more often than Whites and as putting forth less effort. However, they argue that this may have more to do with teacher perception than student beliefs. When assessing concrete attitudes of students, Blacks tend to have more positive attitudes toward school than their White classmates (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey claim to see a positive correlation between being Black and being a good student, meaning Black students are not treated negatively by their peers when they are academically successful. African heritage students are optimistic regarding education even though they are not performing as well in school. These authors suggest that rather than looking at all Black students as being in opposition to the schooling process, researchers acknowledge the fact that some Black students are more positive than Whites toward school. These authors believe the problem lies in the fact that Black students do not have the material resources, due to economic inequalities and racial segregation, to succeed in school (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998).

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey's assessment appears to coincide with the results from this study. The high achievers in this study have specific attainable goals and plans for the future, including college and employment. Although the underachievers did possess some thoughts about the future, they spoke of such goals as becoming a rapper. A career as a rapper is not traditionally seen as a legitimate career goal or related to the formal education system. While teachers could use this career goal to spark a student's interest in English class or poetry, students with these types of career goals are often dismissed as having no goals at all. This group of underachievers did not refer to goals such as going to college or any plans past the 12th grade based on meritocracy. This lack of investment in education and the system of meritocracy may decrease a student's desire or motivation to succeed academically. It is apparent from this study that the high achievers have been raised by their families to aspire toward the traditional "American Dream," including college, successful employment, and raising a family. The underachievers also have goals, but they are not what are deemed to be the "American Dream." These goals include graduating from high school, perhaps becoming a rapper, or attending community college. Once again, these data suggest that underachievers have not given up on life or academics in general. They still have goals; however, being academically successful is not a priority.

Additionally, these goals lead to a variation in motivation. A significant finding to emerge from these data focuses on the high-achieving students' intrinsic motivation for academic achievement. Without family influences, the high achievers state they would be motivated to further their education on their own, while the underachievers state they are getting their high school diplomas to gratify their parents. If students do not have proper support networks, students may not pursue academic success for their own gratification. This study suggests that the high achievers have support networks that have instilled a sense of value to obtaining an education and these students are now self-motivated to learn. While highly motivated and ambitious in other areas, the underachievers do not have support networks that place a high value on education. All students in this study value and respect education on a certain level. The point of difference is in the fact that high achievers view education as valuable to themselves while the underachievers view education as valuable to others. This finding supports Mickleson's (1990) theory on abstract and concrete attitudes toward schooling. Mickleson found that students are capable of holding two differing views regarding education. Abstractly, students in both groups value education as an important tool for success in our society. On a concrete level, the high achievers see themselves as able to benefit from an education, while the underachievers do not see the direct benefits.

CONCLUSION

As the research on Black student achievement has shown, family, self-concept, and cultural history all contribute to the academic achievement of Black students. The debate continues as to whether or not the traumatic history of the Black community in the United States has caused them to create an oppositional culture in order to make sense of it.

Ogbu's (1978, 1991) oppositional culture explanation is appealing as it points to the socio-historical context as the primary factor impeding Black student achievement. This lessens the debate and "blame" that many educators and parents are receiving as a result of the underachievement of Black students. However, Ogbu's critique of the Black experience in the U.S. in terms of oppositional culture does not fully explore the current state of the educational system. By relying on a historical context, it neglects the impact of other factors that may contribute to the underachievement of Black students. These factors include the current relationships in the school between Black students and teachers; the impact peers and family have on student achievement; student self-concept; and socioeconomic issues. Ogbu cites the development of oppositional culture; however, it may actually be a normal reaction to rejection.

There was indeed an ethnic split among the Black students in this sample. What is unclear is whether the differences between ethnic identity and achievement stem from teacher perception and behavior, student and family behavior, or a combination of the two. As this is an exploratory study, with a small voluntary sample, there are limitations in terms of generalizability. Further research must be conducted in order to test the oppositional culture model. Further research should focus on teacher perception and treatment of African American students in comparison to Black immigrants, as well as student investment and their connections to the school and individuals within the school. Consequently, Black students themselves must be assessed through both qualitative and quantitative measures to better understand the factors related to their academic achievement.

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